

An Exploration of Online Marketing in the Sport Industry

Analysis of the Information Content in Top European Basketball Clubs Websites

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Abstract

The advancement of the Internet and Web technologies has captured the attention and imagination of sport fans around the globe. Nevertheless, there is only limited empirical support for the Website's usage by sport organizations to reinforce their existing service offering. The present research investigates factors associated with successful sport websites in order to explore the content of European basketball clubs' websites as well as to ascertain the point at which their content pertains to marketing mix elements. More specifically, based on previous studies concerning online marketing and Web-based sports marketing, the current study examines the way top European basketball clubs are utilizing their Websites. Studying 85 official websites, content analysis revealed that European basketball clubs are 'Product' oriented utilizing categories such as the club's history, photos and the club's news. Moreover, the study highlights the need of on-line sales as well as more interactive features to enhance a user's interest and commitment.

Introduction

Recent advancements in technology have an immediate effect on the way sports managers implement fundamental marketing activities (Shank, 2002). The advancement of the Internet contributed directly to the enhancement of marketing activities, generating both academic and practitioner interest. The degree of sport websites' attractiveness derives primarily from the devotion and concernment of sports supporters who seek to satisfy their daily information needs which have habitually provided from newspapers, tv, radio and magazines (Murphy, 2001). The World Wide Web enhances the sport experience offering a plurality of sport club - related information, such as fixtures and results, squad information, player statistics, tickets etc, as well as various interactive experiences (Moses, 1997). Sport websites have the ability to evolve an extensive sports-related audience, specifically where its capability to develop exclusive, considerable, and interactive content may be utilized to attract and engage sizable, focused audiences.

In accordance with online sport related studies, marketing activities spent on sports sites will surpass £3.75 billion annually. Online sport content has developed into an emerging market, with sport websites evolving into an ideal means for the typical sports fan, providing the opportunity for in-depth information and content exploration (Carlson et al., 2001).

Nowadays, sport websites provide extensive information to online visitors, as well as establish an interactive communication with them (Caskey & Depley, 1999). The above-mentioned characteristics act as an "inside information" source, enhancing further the relation among the club and the supporter, with websites offering sports clubs the opportunity to

establish stronger relationships with their fans than has been heretofore feasible in the offline world (Winer, 2001). Nevertheless, there is limited empirical evidence focusing on web-based sports marketing (Beech, Chadwick and Tapp, 2000; Carlson, Rosenberger and Paynter, 2003), in spite of the indicator that leisure will be an industry with significant growth over the 21st century, with sport sector being increasingly developed (Carlson, Rosenberger and Muthaly, 2003).

Nowadays, little is known about the way professional sports clubs are developing their websites (Huizingh 2000) and using the Internet to interact more effectively with their supporters (Beech et al. 2000). The parameters mentioned above must be known to ascertain if the indispensable specifications for creating an effective website are met. Most of the existing literature concentrates on profitable website management (Pope and Forrest 1997) as well as the way Internet can be utilized as a promoting tool in sport (Johns 1997), instead of its role to intensify and develop the service offered by professional sports clubs.

The present study, based on previous theorizing and research (Brown, 1998; Carlson, et al., 2003), was designed to further contribute to the understanding of the optimal sport websites content. The goal of the present research is twofold: First, to determine the information content of the European Basketball Clubs Websites, and second to figure out how the above content pertains to the elements of the marketing mix. The remainder of this research is categorized as follows. The following section, literature review, presents an overview of related work some of which has been very influential on our design. Next, the underlying principles of the methodology utilized are presented followed by an examination of the results of the analysis. The study then concludes with managerial implications and propositions for further research.

Literature Review

The Internet has effectively revolutionized the sport sector worldwide, procuring a plurality of effective strategic and tactical tools to sport organizations and clubs, which reap in turn significant benefits by developing and enhancing the relations with their supporters. Given their potential effectiveness in cost reduction - as far as sport fans relationship management is concerned - online channels have been included by numerous sport organizations for their marketing purposes (Ganesan et al., 2009).

The growth of Internet technology has modernized the sport sector via the development of plentiful sport related websites and applications (Wang & Qualls, 2007). Internet usage facilitates interaction among sport clubs and their fans, as it provides an effective means for fans to obtain in-depth and accurate information concerning their favorite team, which in turn may enhance ticket sales and subsequent purchase intentions (Bonson & Flores, 2011).

Nowadays, a contemporary tendency has developed within the professional sports sector worldwide, as it transforms from the amateur, club-based style to a 'professionally' regulated business model (Shilbury, Quick and Westerbeek 1998). In more detail, the sport sector has surpassed its amateur borders transforming into a complicated and extremely competitive venture.

The importation of contemporary technology and advanced delivery structures, such as digital technology and the Internet, offered to content providers the opportunity to highly interact with the sport market. The above mentioned advanced delivery structures offered the opportunity to sport organizations to provide an enhanced service offering, by delivering sports content that reciprocates straightforwardly with supporters' interests in sport. Furthermore, contemporary technology generated new promising sources of revenue and business opportunities for sport organizations, such as electronic commerce (Carlson, Rosenberger and Muthaly, 2003).

Hence, the impeccable match among Web and sport sector contributes to the implementation of a successful Internet-based marketing strategy, since their corresponding customer basis has comparable demographics (Brown 1998), with a plethora of information produced by a sport club which may be accumulated on the Internet. The Web enhances the sport experience via thorough service information, stadium information and interactive experiences (Moses 1997). This information availability boosts 'insider knowledge' and enhances the relationship among the team and the supporter, which likewise expedites the interplay with 'fan associations' (Williams and Cothrel 2000), which may have a considerable effect on the market (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000), for example via 'viral marketing' (on-line word of mouth).

Sport clubs have the ability to procure significant information content and inaugurate communication with their supporters via interactive features (Caskey and Deply 1999), as well as permitting dialogue among supporters. The information and interaction availability is crucial for the establishment of 'virtual communities', as by establishing new value-generating communities, or optimally administering the existing ones, sport organizations may significantly embellish their chances for success in the era of web-business (Williams and Cothrel 2000).

Given that nowadays there is a plethora of media options (subscription television system/ radio/internet), available to sports fan consumer, sport clubs have to inaugurate a critical relationship marketing strategy to develop one-to-one marketing. Interactive sports content has the capability to cultivate longstanding relations, which strengthens the affiliation among a sport club and its supporters (Kahle & Meeske, 1999). This interactive content gives the opportunity to supporters to immerse their selves within the website and has the power to enhance supporter identification with the club, therefore intensifying fan loyalty (Carlson et al., 2002).

According to previous studies (Beech et al., 2000), even in the context of underperforming sport clubs, the utilization of their website in order to simplify supporter interaction and loyalty must be initiated. Furthermore, Caskey & Deply (1999) support that additional income sources can also come through the advertisements, merchandise selling, members' subscriptions, as well as availability of online gaming and additional interactive characteristics. Sport club's webpage ought to be a functional, value-generating instrument which embellishes the total sport experience, thus intensifying fan loyalty and enhancing supporters' relations.

The Internet can be a powerful tool in obtaining such marketing advantages (Teo, 2000). As a result, developing frameworks for analyzing sport websites, the essence of a sport club's presence on the Web, will be a crucial part of a sport organization's marketing strategy. The present research utilized a content analysis approach (Brown, 1998) that analyzed the webpages of top European Basketball clubs.

Methodology

The sample for the present research consisted of the 85 official Websites of the European Basketball clubs participating in three European official leagues (Euroleague, Eurocup and Basketball Champions League). The scope of this study examined the information content of every club's official Website in order to gain an insight into the marketing objectives of the Website and how the Internet may be utilized as an efficient marketing instrument (Dholakia and Rego 1998).

Information content can be delineated as the meaning which will be transferred and indicated via text, images and even animation and sounds (Deply and Bosetti 1999). The present research is based on an enriched categorization of information content utilized by similar studies in the past (Brown 1998; Carlson et al., 2003; Carlson et al., 2001). More specifically, categories are based on the four P's of the marketing mix: (a) product, which

refers to the sport club, club and its merchandise (b) price, which refers to ticket and merchandise pricing; (c) promotion, which refers to sport club's promotional activities, as well as the presence in social media (d) place, which refers to game fixtures and scheduling and (e) other, which refers to every information provided by webpage not belonging in anyone of the above mentioned categories. The categories are sorted in accordance with the marketing mix for demonstrating the marketing strategy followed by the designers of the Webpages. Each item was coded as "1" and "0" aiming at reducing subjectivity in the procedure of data collection (Lee & Morrison, 2010), with the results then summed to form an index score.

From a marketing point of view, a lot of the decisions which are crucial for club's survival and growth, as well as the plurality of the marketing factors confronting the contemporary sport organization, classified into the specific categories of the marketing mix (Langabeer, 1998). Moreover, due to its usefulness as a framework and its appropriateness for the plurality of sports sectors, as well as its extensive utilization as an educating instrument in marketing theory, it can be legitimized that the marketing mix constitutes a solid basis for obtaining information for marketing purposes.

Product dimension was measured using 14 items, price was measured by one item, for place dimension 6 items were evaluated and for promotion 12. Finally "other" dimension was formed by 9 categories. In order to obtain the final score, the sub- score of each dimension (adding the "Yes" answers) was divided by the sum of the items that consisted of, multiplying with 100.

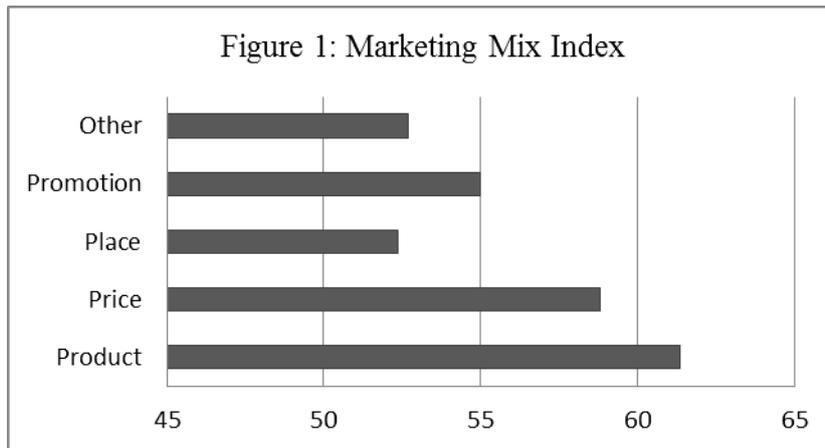
Results

Results indicate that all Basketball Clubs inform their visitors about their news. Moreover, highly utilized are the categories of club's history (91.76%), player's photos (85.88%) as well as match schedule (84.71) and results of the games (84.71). The vast majority of the clubs uses a unique website address (91.76%), obtains information about the upcoming matches (85.88%), makes use of multimedia content (97.65%) and takes advantage of Facebook (95.29%) and Twitter (92.94%). Moreover, most of the Basketball Clubs under study give information about their sponsors (95.29%), use hyperlinks (89.41%), allow the visitors to contact them through e-mail (94.12%) and provide information about the club's headquarters (81.18%).

On the other hand the less utilized categories are the vision/mission of the team (14.12%), promotion of team's special events (12.94%), competitions and prizes (2.35%) and forum facilities (4.7%). Additionally, only a minority of the basketball clubs gives information about community relation programs (20%) and uses flash/start page (14.12%).

Almost half of our sample gives the opportunity to their fans to buy on-line the club's products (52.94%), to buy on line tickets for the matches (57.65%) and gives information about ticket prices (58.82%). Furthermore, approximately half of the clubs utilize the category "seating and/or stadium arrangements information" (47.06%), use more than one language in their website (55.29%) and provide a search facility (51.76%).

Estimating a score for each dimension separately, the figure below (Figure 1) provides the marketing mix score as well as the score of the "other" dimension.



As it is demonstrated in the figure (Figure 1), Basketball Club websites are product oriented with a score of 61.35. Price element is following (58.82), while promotion index is lower at 55. Place and “other” dimensions score 52.35 and 52.68 respectively.

Next table (Table 1), provides the results of the top-ranked basketball websites of our sample deriving from the overall number of categories that they use.

Table 1: Top-ranked basketball websites

Basketball Team	Score	No. Categories
Olympiacos Piraeus	85,71	36
Panathinaikos Superfoods Athens	80,95	34
Real Madrid	80,95	34
CSKA Moscow	76,19	32
FC Bayern Munich	76,19	32
Dominion Bilbao Basket	73,81	31
Besiktas Sompō Japan	73,81	31
Openjobmetis Varese	73,81	31
Brose Bamberg	71,43	30
FC Barcelona Lassa	71,43	30
ALBA Berlin	71,43	30

Results show that the top website utilized 36 categories of our analysis, using all the items of product and price elements as well as 10 out of 12 items for promotion. The next two websites were place and promotion oriented, using most categories of these dimensions. On the other hand, the bottom ranked website used only 11 out of 42 categories.

Discussion - Managerial Implications

Nowadays, the significance of the presence of online sport organizations is widely acknowledged and as result several studies have been conducted in teams’ websites (Seo et al, 2007; Carlson et al, 2003). Being an integral part of communication marketing, teams’ websites can intensify fanship and enhance commitment (Seo et al, 2007). Using interactive characteristics, teams’ websites could create a fan community (Seo et al, 2007); however, in our study interactive games, forum facilities and competitions are underutilized. This could mean that clubs’ websites have the opportunity to enhance visitors’ experience and as result their retention and commitment. According to Ioakimidis (2010), the two components to

enhance online marketing in sports organizations are interaction and multimedia. In our sample almost all of the basketball clubs use multimedia in their websites. Moreover, in her study, Ioakimidis (2010) found that the most commonly used categories of media-based content were social media, e-mail, photo albums which were broadly used also by our sample. Kriemadis et al (2010), studying the websites of Greek and UK football clubs highlighted the importance of on-line sales mentioning that UK websites have failed to this section. In the basketball teams under survey, only half of them used on-line sales calling attention to professionals for greater utilization of this category.

The research sheds light to the elements of marketing mix that most basketball websites use, providing suggestions for further development. Taking into consideration that most websites in our research use product-oriented categories, attention should be paid to the other dimensions of marketing mix that are relatively low. Previous studies (Carlson et al, 2003), however, have found Australian basketball teams to be more place-oriented.

The outcomes of the present research could provide useful information to sport managers by exhibiting the categories that prime basketball teams use. Moreover, as interaction is an important part of communication, emphasis could be given to forums and interactive games. Finally, gathering and analyzing all that information could help professionals to come up with more innovative ideas in order to outperform competitors.

Limitations – Further Research

The popularity of the Internet as well as its rapid evolution, give sport organizations the chance to promote their services more effectively and attract more customers. However, their shift to internet-based marketing should be carefully designed in order to pay special attention to new generations and their expectations. Further research could be expanded to other sports websites as well as to other teams beyond Europe.

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